

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE**THIRD PARTY MERCHANDISE RETURN SYSTEM**

5

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to information
10 processing systems and more particularly to a methodology
and implementation for efficiently processing the
disposition of merchandise which a buyer wishes to return to
a network merchant.

15

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The use of computers and computing devices, including
personal desktop and laptop computers as well as mobile and
20 other wireless devices, to access websites on the World Wide
Web (WWW) through the Internet continues to increase. More
and more merchants are creating commercial websites which
may be easily accessed through the Internet to place orders
for items which are offered for sale at the merchant's
25 website. The purchaser is able to pay for the purchased
items by designating a credit or debit card or account
number, and the merchant or "e-merchant", charges the
designated account for the purchase. Shipments of the
selected items are then made directly to the address
30 specified by the purchaser.

After receipt of the items ordered, customers are able to return items purchased for any of a variety of reasons. For example, the customer or purchaser may not like the color of a particular item or an ordered technology product may not
5 be compatible with the customer's system. In many cases, items are returned for reasons other than the reason that the item is faulty or defective. In those cases, an otherwise workable and acceptable item is returned to the selling merchant. The merchant has no option but to accept
10 the return of such items and to try to resell the item at a greatly discounted rate. In many cases, especially where the ordered item is large and bulky such as a computer system, the shipping and insuring costs can become quite high. This is especially true where the item is return-shipped from the
15 original purchaser to the selling merchant and then shipped again from the selling merchant to a re-selling merchant who may specialize in the re-sale of such returned items.

Thus, there is a need for an improved method and
20 implementing system which are designed to significantly improve the efficiency and reduce the costs associated with the shipment and return of purchased items.

25 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A method and implementing system are provided in which merchants are enabled to designate re-seller return locations to customers for returned items. In an exemplary
30 embodiment, a merchant is notified that a customer wishes to return an item purchased. The merchant then sends the customer a return label for the returned item containing the

address of the re-seller for the merchant. The re-seller then notifies the merchant when the item has been received and the merchant then credits the account of the customer for the returned item. In a second exemplary embodiment, upon receipt of notice from the customer of the return, the merchant then makes the item available for an auction purchase to a number of re-seller merchants or individuals. When a winning bid is known to the merchant, the return address of the winning bidder is then sent to the customer for use in returning the purchased item.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

15 A better understanding of the present invention can be obtained when the following detailed description of a preferred embodiment is considered in conjunction with the following drawings, in which:

20 Figure 1 is an illustration of an exemplary network layout which may be used in one implementation of the present invention;

Figure 2 is a simplified flow diagram illustrating an exemplary set of implementing transactions;

Figure 3 is a simplified flow diagram illustrating another exemplary set of implementing transactions;

30 Figure 4 is a flowchart illustrating one exemplary implementation of an operational sequence in accordance with the present invention;

Figure 5 is a flowchart illustrating another exemplary implementation of an operational sequence in accordance with the present invention; and

5

Figure 6 is a block diagram of a computer system which is in an exemplary embodiment of the present invention.

10 DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The various methods discussed herein may be implemented within a typical computer-related system which may include a workstation, server or personal computer. In general, an
15 implementing computer system at a merchant's website may include a plurality of processors in a multi-bus system in a network of similar systems. However, since the workstation or computer system 101 implementing the present invention in an exemplary embodiment, is generally known in the art and
20 composed of electronic components and circuits which are also generally known to those skilled in the art, circuit details beyond those shown are not specified to any greater extent than that considered necessary as illustrated, for the understanding and appreciation of the underlying
25 concepts of the present invention and in order not to obfuscate or distract from the teachings of the present invention.

In Figure 1, a merchant website 101 is shown connected to a
30 buyer or customer's browser program for example, through an interconnection network 103 such as the Internet. In the example, a customer is running a browser program on the

customer's computer system which may be a personal computer or even a wireless device. In the present disclosure, it is understood that all of the various sites illustrated include communications programming to provide the ability to send
5 emails or instant messages to each other. In the illustrated example, the merchant website 101 and the buyer or customer 107 are also connected to an auction site 105 and to one or more ("n") reseller merchant websites 109. In one example, the merchant 101 has a pre-existing arrangement with
10 particular websites such as reseller 109, such that all of a designated item may be returned from the merchant 101 to the reseller merchant 109 for resale, and the auction site 105 is not used. In another example, when a customer indicates that the customer 107 wishes to return an item, the merchant
15 101 will auction the item to be returned at the auction website 105 prior to notifying the customer 107 where to send the item that is to be returned.

In Figure 2, a transaction flow in accordance with one
20 embodiment of the present invention is illustrated. As shown, a return transaction is accomplished without an auction, i.e. the reseller is known to the merchant and by a prior arrangement, the reseller has agreed to take designated items, either by consignment or sale. In such a
25 case, the merchant 101 maintains a database 201 at the merchant's website, and the database keeps track of which resellers are to receive which returned articles as well as tracking when the return to the reseller has been completed. In the Figure 2 example, a customer will place an order 200
30 for an item to be purchased. This may be accomplished, for example, by the customer filling out a merchant's order form while being connected online to the merchant's website.

Next, after the appropriate order information has been received by the merchant 101, the merchant ships 202 the ordered item to the customer and charges the customer account. Next, in the present example, the customer wishes to return the item for some reason, and sends a request to return the item 204 to the merchant 101, for example by email or instant message. The merchant server then obtains the reseller identity for the designated item from the merchant database 201 and sends a return label 206 to the customer 107 with the name and return address of the reseller merchant 205. In this example, Merchant B 205 is designated as the reseller for the identified item. The customer then uses the return label to send the return item 208 directly to the designated reseller 205. The designated reseller 205 then sends notice to the original merchant 101 that the return has been received 210. At that time, the database 201 is updated and the merchant 101 credits the customer's account and sends notice of the credit 212 to the customer 107.

In Figure 3, another example of the third party return system is illustrated. As shown, the Figure 3 example includes an auction site 301, and a plurality of reseller merchants including a first reseller 203 and a second reseller 205, and individual bidders. After an order is placed 300, an item is shipped 302 and a return request 304 is sent to the selling merchant 101. At that time, the selling merchant 101 puts the item identified for return up for auction at auction site 301 where several merchant and individual bidders are able to bid for the item. For purposes of explanation, it is assumed that in the illustrated example, Merchant B 205 wins the auction for the

identified item. The auction site 301 or the reseller 205 will then notify the original merchant 101 and merchant 101 sends the return label 312 to the customer 107. The customer then returns the item to the designated reseller 205 and
5 reseller 205 will then notify 316 the original merchant 101 of receipt of the returned item. The customers account is then credited and notice of the credit is then sent 318 from the merchant 101 to the customer.

10 In the above examples, all of the required notices and other communications may be sent electronically by email or instant messaging for maximum efficiency and speed. Further, it is apparent that by direct shipping of return items from customers to resellers, at least two intermediate shipments,
15 and the costs associated with such shipments, are obviated without unnecessarily delaying the return process.

Figure 4 illustrates the non-auction implementation in flowchart form. From the illustrated flowcharts, code may be
20 written in any of many languages and installed on the merchant website server 101, and executed from server memory to accomplish the illustrated operational sequence of events. As shown in Figure 4, after the process begins 401, checks are continually made at the merchant server website
25 101 to determine if any of three different events 403, 409 or 415, have occurred. As shown, if a buyer order has been received 403, the order is processed 405 and the ordered item is shipped to the buyer or customer 407. The processing of the order may include, for example the recording of the
30 customer's name and address and the address to which the ordered item is to be shipped. Further, the initial processing 405 may also include recording the charge

information and processing a charge for the item ordered and also printing the address label of the customer's shipping address.

- 5 When it is determined that a buyer or customer return request has been received 409, the merchant server will get the reseller merchant information from the reseller database 201 and send the return information, including a return label, to the buyer or customer 413.

10

The next step in the merchant server process occurs when the it is detected that the reseller merchant 205 has sent notice that the returned item has been received 415. At that time, the merchant's database is updated 417, the customer's
15 account is credited and notice of the credit is sent to the customer 419.

- The auction version of the third party return methodology is illustrated in flowchart form in Figure 5. As shown, after
20 the process has begun 501, when a buyer order is received 503, the order is processed 505 and the item is shipped to the buyer 507. When a return request is received 509, the merchant will do an auction 510 at an auction site and the winner of the auction will be provided to the merchant 511.
- 25 The return information, including the shipping label for the winning bidder, is then sent to the customer or buyer 512. Next, the winning bidder receives the returned item directly from the buyer, and the winning bidder sends notice of such receipt to the merchant 101. When receipt of the reseller
30 notice is detected 515, the merchant server will update the database, credit the buyer's account 517 and send notice of the credit to the buyer 519.

In Figure 6, there is shown several of the major electronic subsystems which are included in an exemplary embodiment of the merchant's server. As shown, a processor 601 is coupled to a system bus 603 which may be any host system bus. It is noted that the processing methodology disclosed herein will apply to many different bus and/or network configurations although only one example is illustrated. A memory subsystem 605, a storage device 607 and selected medium devices 609 such as a diskette drive or a CD drive, are also shown connected to the system bus 603. The information processing circuitry illustrated in Figure 6 is arranged to establish a communication link and initiate communication with other processing systems and websites. The system, for example, may be connected through a network interface connection 613 to any appropriate network including the Internet, or to a gateway computer for connection to the Internet and selected websites which contain useful information for access. The exemplary system also includes an input interface 611 to enable administrator input to the server system, and also a video system for display of various aspects of the designated transactions at the server site.

The method and apparatus of the present invention has been described in connection with a preferred embodiment as disclosed herein. The disclosed methodology may be implemented in a wide range of sequences, menus and screen designs to accomplish the desired results as herein illustrated. Although an embodiment of the present invention has been shown and described in detail herein, along with certain variants thereof, many other varied embodiments that incorporate the teachings of the invention may be easily

constructed by those skilled in the art, and even included
or integrated into a processor or CPU or other larger system
integrated circuit or chip. The disclosed methodology may
also be implemented solely or partly in program code and
5 executed to achieve the beneficial results as described
herein. Accordingly, the present invention is not intended
to be limited to the specific form set forth herein, but on
the contrary, it is intended to cover such alternatives,
modifications, and equivalents, as can be reasonably
10 included within the spirit and scope of the invention.

11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
77
78
79
80
81
82
83
84
85
86
87
88
89
90
91
92
93
94
95
96
97
98
99
100
101
102
103
104
105
106
107
108
109
110
111
112
113
114
115
116
117
118
119
120
121
122
123
124
125
126
127
128
129
130
131
132
133
134
135
136
137
138
139
140
141
142
143
144
145
146
147
148
149
150
151
152
153
154
155
156
157
158
159
160
161
162
163
164
165
166
167
168
169
170
171
172
173
174
175
176
177
178
179
180
181
182
183
184
185
186
187
188
189
190
191
192
193
194
195
196
197
198
199
200
201
202
203
204
205
206
207
208
209
210
211
212
213
214
215
216
217
218
219
220
221
222
223
224
225
226
227
228
229
230
231
232
233
234
235
236
237
238
239
240
241
242
243
244
245
246
247
248
249
250
251
252
253
254
255
256
257
258
259
260
261
262
263
264
265
266
267
268
269
270
271
272
273
274
275
276
277
278
279
280
281
282
283
284
285
286
287
288
289
290
291
292
293
294
295
296
297
298
299
300
301
302
303
304
305
306
307
308
309
310
311
312
313
314
315
316
317
318
319
320
321
322
323
324
325
326
327
328
329
330
331
332
333
334
335
336
337
338
339
340
341
342
343
344
345
346
347
348
349
350
351
352
353
354
355
356
357
358
359
360
361
362
363
364
365
366
367
368
369
370
371
372
373
374
375
376
377
378
379
380
381
382
383
384
385
386
387
388
389
390
391
392
393
394
395
396
397
398
399
400
401
402
403
404
405
406
407
408
409
410
411
412
413
414
415
416
417
418
419
420
421
422
423
424
425
426
427
428
429
430
431
432
433
434
435
436
437
438
439
440
441
442
443
444
445
446
447
448
449
450
451
452
453
454
455
456
457
458
459
460
461
462
463
464
465
466
467
468
469
470
471
472
473
474
475
476
477
478
479
480
481
482
483
484
485
486
487
488
489
490
491
492
493
494
495
496
497
498
499
500
501
502
503
504
505
506
507
508
509
510
511
512
513
514
515
516
517
518
519
520
521
522
523
524
525
526
527
528
529
530
531
532
533
534
535
536
537
538
539
540
541
542
543
544
545
546
547
548
549
550
551
552
553
554
555
556
557
558
559
560
561
562
563
564
565
566
567
568
569
570
571
572
573
574
575
576
577
578
579
580
581
582
583
584
585
586
587
588
589
590
591
592
593
594
595
596
597
598
599
600
601
602
603
604
605
606
607
608
609
610
611
612
613
614
615
616
617
618
619
620
621
622
623
624
625
626
627
628
629
630
631
632
633
634
635
636
637
638
639
640
641
642
643
644
645
646
647
648
649
650
651
652
653
654
655
656
657
658
659
660
661
662
663
664
665
666
667
668
669
670
671
672
673
674
675
676
677
678
679
680
681
682
683
684
685
686
687
688
689
690
691
692
693
694
695
696
697
698
699
700
701
702
703
704
705
706
707
708
709
710
711
712
713
714
715
716
717
718
719
720
721
722
723
724
725
726
727
728
729
730
731
732
733
734
735
736
737
738
739
740
741
742
743
744
745
746
747
748
749
750
751
752
753
754
755
756
757
758
759
760
761
762
763
764
765
766
767
768
769
770
771
772
773
774
775
776
777
778
779
780
781
782
783
784
785
786
787
788
789
790
791
792
793
794
795
796
797
798
799
800
801
802
803
804
805
806
807
808
809
810
811
812
813
814
815
816
817
818
819
820
821
822
823
824
825
826
827
828
829
830
831
832
833
834
835
836
837
838
839
840
841
842
843
844
845
846
847
848
849
850
851
852
853
854
855
856
857
858
859
860
861
862
863
864
865
866
867
868
869
870
871
872
873
874
875
876
877
878
879
880
881
882
883
884
885
886
887
888
889
890
891
892
893
894
895
896
897
898
899
900
901
902
903
904
905
906
907
908
909
910
911
912
913
914
915
916
917
918
919
920
921
922
923
924
925
926
927
928
929
930
931
932
933
934
935
936
937
938
939
940
941
942
943
944
945
946
947
948
949
950
951
952
953
954
955
956
957
958
959
960
961
962
963
964
965
966
967
968
969
970
971
972
973
974
975
976
977
978
979
980
981
982
983
984
985
986
987
988
989
990
991
992
993
994
995
996
997
998
999
1000
1001
1002
1003
1004
1005
1006
1007
1008
1009
1010
1011
1012
1013
1014
1015
1016
1017
1018
1019
1020
1021
1022
1023
1024
1025
1026
1027
1028
1029
1030
1031
1032
1033
1034
1035
1036
1037
1038
1039
1040
1041
1042
1043
1044
1045
1046
1047
1048
1049
1050
1051
1052
1053
1054
1055
1056
1057
1058
1059
1060
1061
1062
1063
1064
1065
1066
1067
1068
1069
1070
1071
1072
1073
1074
1075
1076
1077
1078
1079
1080
1081
1082
1083
1084
1085
1086
1087
1088
1089
1090
1091
1092
1093
1094
1095
1096
1097
1098
1099
1100
1101
1102
1103
1104
1105
1106
1107
1108
1109
1110
1111
1112
1113
1114
1115
1116
1117
1118
1119
1120
1121
1122
1123
1124
1125
1126
1127
1128
1129
1130
1131
1132
1133
1134
1135
1136
1137
1138
1139
1140
1141
1142
1143
1144
1145
1146
1147
1148
1149
1150
1151
1152
1153
1154
1155
1156
1157
1158
1159
1160
1161
1162
1163
1164
1165
1166
1167
1168
1169
1170
1171
1172
1173
1174
1175
1176
1177
1178
1179
1180
1181
1182
1183
1184
1185
1186
1187
1188
1189
1190
1191
1192
1193
1194
1195
1196
1197
1198
1199
1200
1201
1202
1203
1204
1205
1206
1207
1208
1209
1210
1211
1212
1213
1214
1215
1216
1217
1218
1219
1220
1221
1222
1223
1224
1225
1226
1227
1228
1229
1230
1231
1232
1233
1234
1235
1236
1237
1238
1239
1240
1241
1242
1243
1244
1245
1246
1247
1248
1249
1250
1251
1252
1253
1254
1255
1256
1257
1258
1259
1260
1261
1262
1263
1264
1265
1266
1267
1268
1269
1270
1271
1272
1273
1274
1275
1276
1277
1278
1279
1280
1281
1282
1283
1284
1285
1286
1287
1288
1289
1290
1291
1292
1293
1294
1295
1296
1297
1298
1299
1300
1301
1302
1303
1304
1305
1306
1307
1308
1309
1310
1311
1312
1313
1314
1315
1316
1317
1318
1319
1320
1321
1322
1323
1324
1325
1326
1327
1328
1329
1330
1331
1332
1333
1334
1335
1336
1337
1338
1339
1340
1341
1342
1343
1344
1345
1346
1347
1348
1349
1350
1351
1352
1353
1354
1355
1356
1357
1358
1359
1360
1361
1362
1363
1364
1365
1366
1367
1368
1369
1370
1371
1372
1373
1374
1375
1376
1377
1378
1379
1380
1381
1382
1383
1384
1385
1386
1387
1388
1389
1390
1391
1392
1393
1394
1395
1396
1397
1398
1399
1400
1401
1402
1403
1404
1405
1406
1407
1408
1409
1410
1411
1412
1413
1414
1415
1416
1417
1418
1419
1420
1421
1422
1423
1424
1425
1426
1427
1428
1429
1430
1431
1432
1433
1434
1435
1436
1437
1438
1439
1440
1441
1442
1443
1444
1445
1446
1447
1448
1449
1450
1451
1452
1453
1454
1455
1456
1457
1458
1459
1460
1461
1462
1463
1464
1465
1466
1467
1468
1469
1470
1471
1472
1473
1474
1475
1476
1477
1478
1479
1480
1481
1482
1483
1484
1485
1486
1487
1488
1489
1490
1491
1492
1493
1494
1495
1496
1497
1498
1499
1500
1501
1502
1503
1504
1505
1506
1507
1508
1509
1510
1511
1512
1513
1514
1515
1516
1517
1518
1519
1520
1521
1522
1523
1524
1525
1526
1527
1528
1529
1530
1531
1532
1533
1534
1535
1536
1537
1538
1539
1540
1541
1542
1543
1544
1545
1546
1547
1548
1549
1550
1551
1552
1553
1554
1555
1556
1557
1558
1559
1560
1561
1562
1563
1564
1565
1566
1567
1568
1569
1570
1571
1572
1573
1574
1575
1576
1577
1578
1579
1580
1581
1582
1583
1584
1585
1586
1587
1588
1589
1590
1591
1592
1593
1594
1595
1596
1597
1598
1599
1600
1601
1602
1603
1604
1605
1606
1607
1608
1609
1610
1611
1612
1613
1614
1615
1616
1617
1618
1619
1620
1621
1622
1623
1624
1625
1626
1627
1628
1629
1630
1631
1632
1633
1634
1635
1636
1637
1638
1639
1640
1641
1642
1643
1644
1645
1646
1647
1648
1649
1650
1651
1652
1653
1654
1655
1656
1657
1658
1659
1660
1661
1662
1663
1664
1665
1666
1667
1668
1669
1670
1671
1672
1673
1674
1675
1676
1677
1678
1679
1680
1681
1682
1683
1684
1685
1686
1687
1688
1689
1690
1691
1692
1693
1694
1695
1696
1697
1698
1699
1700
1701
1702
1703
1704
1705
1706
1707
1708
1709
1710
1711
1712
1713
1714
1715
1716
1717
1718
1719
1720
1721
1722
1723
1724
1725
1726
1727
1728
1729
1730
1731
1732
1733
1734
1735
1736
1737
1738
1739
1740
1741
1742
1743
1744
1745
1746
1747
1748
1749
1750
1751
1752
1753
1754
1755
1756
1757
1758
1759
1760
1761
1762
1763
1764
1765
1766
1767
1768
1769
1770
1771
1772
1773
1774
1775
1776
1777
1778
1779
1780
1781
1782
1783
1784
1785
1786
1787
1788
1789
1790
1791
1792
1793
1794
1795
1796
1797
1798
1799
1800
1801
1802
1803
1804
1805
1806
1807
1808
1809
1810
1811
1812
1813
1814
1815
1816
1817
1818
1819
1820
1821
1822
1823
1824
1825
1826
1827
1828
1829
1830
1831
1832
1833
1834
1835
1836
1837
1838
1839
1840
1841
1842
1843
1844
1845
1846
1847
1848
1849
1850
1851
1852
1853
1854
1855
1856
1857
1858
1859
1860
1861
1862
1863
1864
1865
1866
1867
1868
1869
1870
1871
1872
1873
1874
1875
1876
1877
1878
1879
1880
1881
1882
1883
1884
1885
1886
1887
1888
1889
1890
1891
1892
1893
1894
1895
1896
1897
1898
1899
1900
1901
1902
1903
1904
1905
1906
1907
1908
1909
1910
1911
1912
1913
1914
1915
1916
1917
1918
1919
1920
1921
1922
1923
1924
1925
1926
1927
1928
1929
1930
1931
1932
1933
1934
1935
1936
1937
1938
1939
1940
1941
1942
1943
1944
1945
1946
1947
1948
1949
1950
1951
1952
1953
1954
1955
1956
1957
1958
1959
1960
1961
1962
1963
1964
1965
1966
1967
1968
1969
1970
1971
1972
1973
1974
1975
1976
1977
1978
1979
1980
1981
1982
1983
1984
1985
1986
1987
1988
1989
1990
1991
1992
1993
1994
1995
1996
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
2025
2026
2027
2028
2029
2030
2031
2032
2033
2034
2035
2036
2037
2038
2039
2040
2041
2042
2043
2044
2045
2046
2047
2048
2049
2050
2051
2052
2053
2054
2055
2056
2057
2058
2059
2060
2061
2062
2063
2064
2065
2066
2067
2068
2069
2070
2071
2072
2073
2074
2075
2076
2077
2078
2079
2080
2081
2082
2083
2084
2085
2086
2087
2088
2089
2090
2091
2092
2093
2094
2095
2096
2097
2098
2099
2100
2101
2102
2103
2104
2105
2106
2107
2108
2109
2110
2111
2112
2113
2114
2115
2116
2117
2118
2119
2120
2121
2122
2123
2124
2125
2126
2127
2128
2129
2130
2131
2132
2133
2134
2135
2136
2137
2138
2139
2140
2141
2142
2143
2144
2145
2146
2147
2148
2149
2150
2151
2152
2153
2154
2155
2156
2157
2158
2159
2160
2161
2162
2163
2164
2165
2166
2167
2168
2169
2170
2171
2172
2173
2174
2175
2176
2177
2178
2179
2180
2181
2182
2183
2184
2185
2186
2187
2188
2189
2190
2191
2192
2193
2194
2195
2196
2197
2198
2199
2200
2201
2202
2203
2204
2205
2206